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Housekeepers' Chat

Wednesday, December 25, 1929.

Not For Publication

Subject: "Zero Hour on Christmas Day." From an article by Frances Lester Warner, in Children, The Magazine for Parents, December, 1928.

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What do you do, on Christmas afternoon, when the zero hour arrives? Every family faces a zero hour -- late afternoon on Christmas day, the children tired and cross, parents almost at the end of their patience. The story I am going to tell you this morning explains how one group of mothers made Christmas afternoon merry. The story is called: "Zero Hour on Christmas." It is written by Frances Lester Warner.

The story begins with a group of young married women, sitting before a fire, having tea in Sue Morrison's living room. Every woman present was a parent. To go on with the story:

"Christmas," observed Eleanor Gray, "is going to be difficult this year, with three different varieties of epidemic among the children over on the North Side. I'm not going to dare to let mine go into town to any of the church or club parties, or even to the community play."

"They're going to call off most of those things anyway," said Louisa Eaton, whose husband was a doctor. "And zero hour in our house will be from about half past four to seven on Christmas afternoon -- too dark to go riding or coasting, too early to go to bed -- the children as tired and cross as the dickens --"

"Oh, don't I know!" broke in Dorothy Gibson. "Here's our family recipe for that sad hour: take four small boys, who have been up since five in the morning, mix well with an electric train, roller skates, pocket knives and whatnot, and shake thoroughly."

"How did our fathers and mothers tide us over the anti-climax of Christmas afternoon?" asked Eleanor. "I don't seem to remember being so very bad myself."

"Neither will your young Tom or Estelle, when they're thirty," prophesied Sue.

"How would it work," suggested Dorothy, "if you all came over to our house on Christmas afternoon, at half-past four, bringing your husbands and the younger generation with you? Let it be a surprise, so that if anybody does come down with mumps or measles or chicken-pox, no hearts will be broken. Don't make any preparations, and I'll not. Bring some things to dress up in,

old clothes, draperies, rag-bag treasures -- but don't plan the costumes, for we'll pool the materials and draw lots for rival companies. Then we'll have some tableaux and a grand march, and a simple little supper, and carol singing, and home before eight."

"As to the simple little supper," observed Louisa Eaton, practically, "have you reflected that we shall aggregate about twenty-four souls? Don't you think you had better omit the supper, and send us all home to our cereal and orange juice?"

"Oh no!" protested Dorothy. "It will be fun and we can run it off easily. The only things we'll have will be rolls and clear chicken jelly and ice cream. Sue can bring rolls, Lydia and Eleanor bring cookies, and I'll make the jelly and ice cream. We'll have two rival teams do the work, mixed, you know, all ages on each team."

At half-past four on Christmas afternoon the guests began to arrive at the Gibson home, to be greeted at the door by four irrepressible boys. One of the latter showed the ladies upstairs, another collected the costume materials and laid them out on the living room table, another provided each guest with a numbered card.

When the guests had all arrived, the hostess explained that the numbers they had drawn indicated to what team they belonged. All odd numbers were asked to assemble on the left side of the living room, all even numbers on the right. Then the choosing of materials began. In order of number, each member of the teams selected some item of clothing or bit of gay fabric from the collection on the table.

When all the spoils had been divided, the odd numbers went upstairs with their plunder, and the even numbers were given the freedom of the lower floor. Each team was provided with five papers of assorted pins, a heap of old newspapers, a roll of white shelf paper, and a ball of twine. The costumes were to be completed in 20 minutes, without any sewing. The parents were instructed to dress as toys, children, animals, or nursery-rhyme creatures, and the children were to dress as grown-ups, historical figures, or characters from books.

An occasional squeal of delight came up from below as San Gray "made up" for Old King Cole, with a wonderful cretonne curtain for a train, an ancient velour couch cover for a robe. Lydie Wadsworth, already dressed as a talking doll who said "Ma-ma" whenever she bent forward, deftly transformed the well-known Doctor Eaton into Peter Rabbit, with wonderful long white paper ears. And as for the children, they were in the seventh heaven, trying on first one thing and then another.

Everyone knows with what quaint dignity a group of children can parade in grown-up clothes. Tiny Estelle Gray, as Mother Goose, looked like a miniature lady by Wateau, with a lavender negligee looped up over her own little dress, her father masquerading as her goose. At a chord from the

piano, each team formed in line, single file, and started the winding procession through the house. Downstairs marched the odd numbers; around through the dining room marched the even numbers; and in the long corridor the two teams joined forces and continued the grand march.

Louisa Eaton, dressed as Little Bo-Peep, sat at the piano playing the march, and Peter Rabbit accompanied her on a new toy drum. Around went the gay pageant, everyone guessing what everyone else was supposed to represent. Peter Rabbit was the easiest to guess of all. Even the tiniest children shouted his name the moment they saw his brown wrapping-paper ears.

Peter was elected master of ceremonies, and taking charge of things, arranged the folding doors so that they were just the size of a picture-frame. He then invited one character after another to come and stand in the frame to be "guessed." As the different guesses were made, the person in the picture either shook or wagged his head, and finally Peter Rabbit made a short speech describing each one's character, with many a local hit.

Before anyone knew it, supper time had come. Once more a set of cards was distributed by the Gibson boys. This time, instead of numbers, the cards contained instructions as to the duties each one was to undertake. Each guest had some part to play.

(Here is a list of the guests, with their duties:)

Nat: Serve chicken jelly from side table.

Tom: Buttle water.

Jack: Pass rolls in basket.

Sam: Remove jelly-plates, bring in plates for ice cream from pantry table.

Dick: Get ice cream from freezer.

John: Wash tumblers and silver.

Eleanor: Dry tumblers and silver

Nat (again): Wash plates.

Lydia: Wipe plates.

Estelle: Put napkins in hamper.

And finally, with all trace of the Christmas supper cleared away, the whole company gathered around the piano and sang the old carols. It was a pretty group -- Miss Muffet, Bo-Peep, King Cole, Peter Rabbit, Robin Hood, Jackie Coogan, and Cinderella's Fairy Godmother, with her starry wand.

Then came the good-byes, and off they all went into the early starlight, the children tired but happy, the grown-ups declaring that they had found the best possible solution of what to do with Christmas afternoon.

That's all of the story, called "Zero Hour on Christmas." Perhaps in it you will find a solution of your own problem, of what to do with Christmas afternoon.

